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ABSTRACT

The logistics for college adaptation of telecourses entail certain procedures which, though they differ from one school to another, still encompass a basic minimum of steps that need to be taken: (1) the decision to investigate; (2) the ascertainment of interest within the relevant disciplines; (3) the evaluation and acceptance of an available course or, if working with cable television, selection from a list of available courses; (4) selection of a faculty manager for each course; and (5) careful planning of a schedule for promotion. Since most telecourses require specific textbooks, a department must also evaluate and accept or reject the text; often these departmental discussions are heated, since faculty are often suspicious about accepting new materials not locally developed. The faculty member in charge of the course, the "course manager," must also be apprised of his/her role in the process; the concept of being in charge of a course without actually being a classroom focal point may be difficult for some faculty to understand and accept. Finally, decisions regarding the target population and the amount of tuition to charge for the telecourse must be made. Since the university needs to at least break even after paying the licensing fees, faculty salary, and promotional costs, numerous students must be attracted to keep course costs down. Successful promotion is one way to ensure student enrollment and it is often the crucial factor in determining the success or failure of a university telecourse. (JB)

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Delivering Telecourses: Procedural Issues

by Bette M. Rothstein

Television courses are something like the new girl in town. They are looked at hopefully by some, apprehensively and suspiciously by others. Even the decision to take the first step toward getting acquainted may require that some of us overcome old prejudices simply to entertain the idea of a new approach. Television courses, though, do represent a whole new arena of teaching. Just taking the first step, just making the decision to investigate can launch a college into a whole new arena of endeavor--the actual offering of television courses. Once a college enters that arena, we know the new girl has made an impression, but she still has a way to go before she establishes herself in the community.

The logistics for college adaptation of telecourses entail certain procedures which, though they do differ from one school to another, still encompass a basic of minimum of steps that need to be taken. Of course, few of these steps are worth taking without a firm suspicion that somewhere out there the community will be responsive to this concept of distance learning. Although the decision to investigate is itself is the first step, fast behind it come others. Fortunately, though, we're not exactly trailblazing, except in our own locales. Others who felt the lure of distance learning have preceded us. And thus "customary" procedures begin to emerge: First, the decision to investigate; second, the ascertainment of interest within the relevant disciplines; next, the evaluation and acceptance of an available course, or--when working with cable tv--selection from

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a whole list of available courses, again involving a mammoth job of course evaluation. Then comes the selection of a faculty manager for each course and the careful planning of a schedule for promotion. Of course you can divine that there is a given quantity here; somewhere along the line you must garner administrative support. That in itself may require some trailblazing.

How does it happen that a college or university makes its first decision to offer a television course? First of all, there must be an awareness of such courses as possibilities and a person or group of people who are interested.

In Washington, D. C., a city still without cable television, Channel 26, WETA, the educational channel backed by the Public Broadcasting Corporation, took on the challenge. Educational programmers there planned to offer a few telecourses in the spring of 1981 if they could find willing licensees among the colleges in the area. To locate potential support, WETA did the research necessary to learn who, in each college setting, would become a contact person. That person would serve as link and spearhead to further the interest on his or her campus. Contact people would be responsible for and represent each university indicating interest. They would attend screenings of the telecourses under consideration for next spring. That group would interact with its own campuses and glean for the station what interest lay dormant and which courses had the most potential.

At UDC, as frequently happens, the original contact was with the School of Continuing Education. This is not surprising,

since it is known that schools of continuing education are among the most likely divisions within a university to welcome an innovative procedure. And welcome this one they did, but the courses themselves had yet to be posed to the relevant departments. Faculty within those departments needed to be searched for evidence of their willingness to tackle the new and sometimes intimidating project.

For purposes of focus and brevity I'll deal here only with what occurs between a university departmental discipline and an educational tv station in a city such a Washington, D. C., where cable has not yet become available. But first let me emphasize the comparative simplicity of the situation when the college has access to cable. Such fortunate colleges have far fewer times constraints and considerably fewer financial restraints than do colleges in an uncabled area where tv time is constricted and expensive. So back to reality. Once the public tv station, not cabled, has agreed to schedule a certain telecourse, it will notify those identified as interested from nearby universities. These representatives will view screenings that serve as preliminary evaluations and as the initial contact between the course source and the university. The universities must then respond within a specific time frame regarding their decisions about whether and which courses they will offer. Obviously this is more quickly said than done. The department, be it English, Political Science, Business, or Psychology, must proceed with the course evaluation proceeded with evaluation of the course. At UDC, I represented the School of Continuing Education, made the initial contact, and was now in the position where I must follow through as liaison

helping the individual disciplines to understand just what is involved in offering telecourses. In this role, I had the responsibility to explain the very different logistics involved and to facilitate the departmental evaluation required before a course could be accepted or adapted. I helped arrange for sample viewings, --each program being a lesson--, and thus made possible the necessary departmental viewings.

Most telecourses require specific textbooks. The department must evaluate and accept or reject the text, also. Often these departmental discussions are heated, since faculty are far from open armed about accepting new materials not locally developed. But once they recognize the quality and vote to accept the course, the department is often excited about the course. Faculty members begin to understand that they can exercise controls in connection with the course.

If the course can be seen as qualitatively equal to another existing course, the customary long procedures for adopting at UDC can be simplified. In other words, if the department is willing to approach the course as another version of an existing course, the adoption procedure is automatically simplified.

While the department is deciding to offer a telecourse it needs also to be identifying the faculty person who will teach it. That person is called "course manager." Because they are already inundated with projects, meetings, teaching and research, professors are loathe to embrace a new project unless one among them is bright-eyed and receptive. But even this person may not yet have an accurate idea of her role as course manager and how

it differs from that of a lecturing, conferencing classroom professor. I learned that it is very important to spell out her role clearly from the start. The concept of being in charge of a course without actually being a classoom focal point is strange and new and even brilliant professors often absorb the idea hesitantly. Even after the department has selected the faculty manager, other faculty may still not understand that she isn't lecturing on television or producing her own course. Although her role as course manager is pivotal and potentially creative, it is basically different. One of the most important procedures in introducing telecourses to a campus is educating the faculty and administration regarding the actual role of the professor who is a course manager.

The faculty manager is the on-campus contact person for the course. He or she maintains telephone and conference communication with the students, prepares the testing materials, offers on-campus orientations and provides regular feedback to the written assignments students mail in. The course manager keeps track of each students' progress and responds to that student with clarifying comment and materials when she senses the need. She maintains records, and prepares, supervises and grades the exams. She encourages students to call her during certain hours, if they need help of any kind connected with the course. If her class(es) are large, she may need help. But college administrations differ regarding how much backup support they will offer. Ideally, telecourse students should have full daytime access to a phone number where they can ask questions whenever they arise. This convenient constant potential for communication

with the telecourse manager is important in the telecourse setup, because students in distant learning, non-classroom settings can become easily discouraged. If a bewildered or momentarily stumped student can make a phone call to a receptive teacher who is willing to explain, enlarge, encourage or reassure, that student has a greater chance of completing the course. Immediate feedback in dealing with the student's problem, whether it be a late assignment or information on the upcoming exam--or whatever-- gives that student the maximum opportunity to complete the course. For all of those reasons, the course manager should be a patient and sensitive person who cares deeply about individuals, especially individuals who are potential students.

Assume now that you have hurdled the on-campus preliminaries. You have chosen the course, the department has accepted it and selected the course manager. The month is, we hope, no later than February or early March, so that you have time for the administrative decisions that need to precede efforts to promote the course. First among the decisions is the amount of tuition to charge for the telecourse. The university needs to break at least even after paying licensing fees, faculty salary and promotional costs. The university thus wants to attract numerous students and knows that to do so it must keep course costs down. It must be sure the course is not too expensive. Can students registered for a full courseload take the course without extra charge? Is it available to them under regular, full-time tuition? If so, we may attract some of our own students. If not, we are aiming at another part of the

community that otherwise wouldn't be considering taking a college course. By that we mean would-be students who are unable to come to campus because of work, health or other limiting conditions. We must tackle athese decisions regarding our target population without delay so that we will have adequate time for promoting the course.

Our experience proves that promotion is the strategic factor in the success of potential telecourse. In Washington, D.C., government offices often sponsor employees to further their education, to become more competitive in the white-collar environment. This means that they provide employees with a certain amount of release time and tuition.

We have a telecourse series called "Lunchtime Learning." It is successful in direct ratio to the amount of promptly timed promotion that precedes it: Letters to government offices, leaflets to target areas, newspaper and radio and television announcements--we need them all. We also need enough lead time to include the course in the Fall Catalog and to allow

the tv station access to our name for their own publicity.

It becomes obvious that last minute decisions are not conducive to successful telecourse offerings. Like most worthwhile endeavors, each telecourse requires careful and deliberate planning as well as cooperation among different segments of the university. Uphill as all this may appear to be, it has a unique advantage: IT IS A NEW APPROACH, using modern technology and appealing to a whole new spectrum of the community.

With all these attractions to her credit, we might well consider welcoming that new girl in town. It might even be worth all that effort to get acquainted. She has a lot to offer. She has a different kind of appeal. She's anything but a pushover and she can be a very effective communicator once you get to know her. Be careful, though, for she must be carefully introduced, and she's not responsive to last minute plans. Since she's so different, some people are jealous of her, suspicious until they get to know her. Then they realize she won't steal anyone away. She appeals to a different crowd.
hurdled.